

# AMC Launches New Jeep



You're not allowed to feel like Dan Gurney on the public roads anymore...but who's to say you can't play Bobby Ferro in the desert?

Inn Thompson photos

What can you make of the Jeep?

Sure as we say it's been unchanged since World War II, we'll get letters from every American Motors and Jeep dealer in the country detailing every screw in its body and stitch in its upholstery, and we don't need that, thank you. But in its conception, its purpose and the maker's refusal to compromise on the way to building a vehicle for that purpose, it is unchanged.

Certainly the styling shows a...continuity...not present in most vehicles. Look at a 1949 Chevy, and you

identical to the CJ-5 that preceded it. The additional 10 inches between the wheels isn't obvious even when the two vehicles are parked next to each other—a situation that did not occur by accident. As offroad vehicles have gotten bigger, wider, and heavier, Jeep has managed to get a good piece of both ends of the market with the luxurious Wagoneer and Cherokee and the rather stark CJ models. The company wasn't going to give away the product identification that goes with that spunky, square-shouldered Jeep silhouette. Look at the bottom of the door opening: if it's

complicated thing to go wrong. It also eliminates power oversteer, one of life's under-rated joys. Power neutral steer might be just the thing for a Formula 1 car, but why would anyone want to go fast on the dirt if you can't hang the tail out?

Finally, the CJ-7 shares with the Five (which will still be available, by the way) a greatly strengthened new frame. The Five has dropped an insignificant half-inch in wheelbase, to 83.5 inches, and both vehicles should be much stronger than previous offerings.

We have yet to drive a new CJ-5, so we can't say with absolute certainty that it's unchanged. But Jeep says there's no big change, and that's good enough for us. The Seven is certainly better than the old CJ-5 and, therefore, better than the new one.

Start with the ride. Contrary to popular belief, you don't have to have a ride that flaps your ears in order to get good offroad performance. All you need is a lot of ground clearance, a lot of suspension travel, and you can fly over logs the size of an ICBM without disturbing the kids in the back seat. The CJ-7's got it. You'll never mistake it for a Lincoln, but for what it is, the ride isn't bad. It's firm on the highway—though those of you who owned sports cars in 1965 will not be put off—yet yields to really big thumps off road. For serious back-of-beyond use the suspension could hardly be better, but one wonders how much of the average Jeep's time is spent off the road. Even in the West, where "Off road" is often your back yard, there are many more so-called "offroad vehicles" in the shopping centers than canted 45 degrees across a brush covered sidehill. A suggestion: If you need a Jeep, buy the CJ-7 or its ilk. If you just want a Jeep, you can still get by with the "Jeep" Jeep. But if you want a hulking great boxy thing to drive to work 50 weeks a year to wow the secretaries with what an outdoorsy guy you are, and maybe to drive on vacation the last two weeks in August, you'll probably be happier with something a little less bare.

For even in CJ-7 form, the Jeep is not a mobile boudoir. The ride, as mentioned, is acceptable; more than acceptable when you consider what you gain for the softness lost. But there aren't any carpets, so the floor is cold. And we don't think there's an angle in the thing that isn't square—not for Jeep owners the rounded contours favored by lesser vehicles. While it's comfortable in context, taken as

a vehicle to drive 450 miles on the Interstate by a man used to an Eldo or even a Chevelle the Jeep is a disaster.

Ah, but if those 450 miles are on fire trails or rutted dirt roads, where the CJ-7 gets a chance to work...the driver will be a happy man when he arrives.

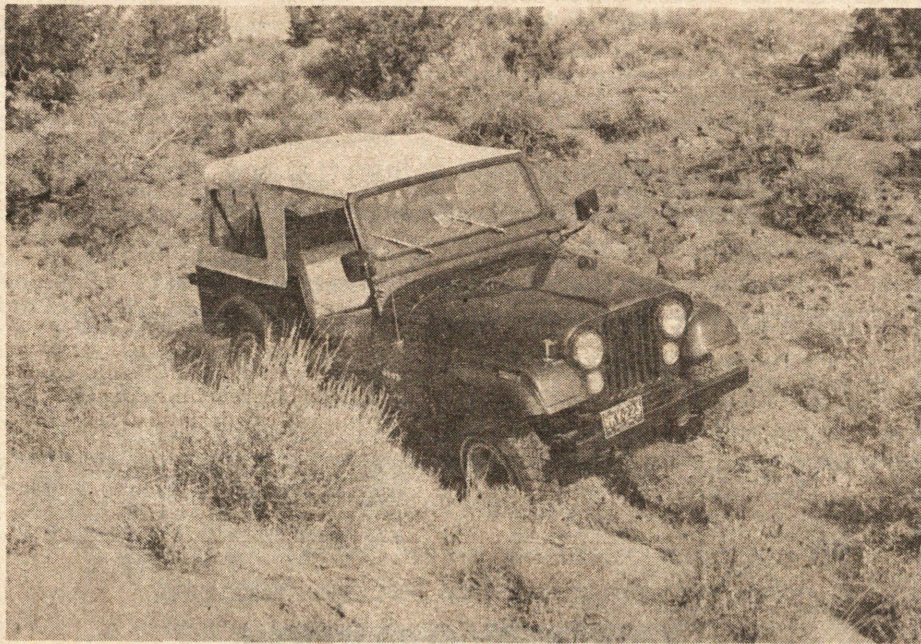
And he almost certainly will arrive, no matter what he has to cross to get there. Chances are most *Autoweek* readers don't have much experience with offroad vehicles. If you don't, and if you go for a ride in suitable country with someone who does, you will be struck dumb at the places a Jeep (or other four wheel drive vehicle) will go. After a timid beginning, we grew gradually braver until we were hurling the Seven at seemingly impossible grades and winding down through canyons so narrow the Jeep wound up rubbing its sidewalls against the walls four feet from the ground, jammed in like a man climbing a chimney.

It loved it. In two weeks of pummeling "our" Jeep around in the roughest part of eastern California and western Nevada, we found only one obstacle it would not surmount, a quarter-mile long 50% grade covered with loose sand mixed with rocks ranging up to the size of a basketball. There was no room for a run at the hill and every time it seemed as though we'd make it, we'd hit one of those rocks and bog down. With different tires—though the ones that were on it would be our first choice for their good compromise between highway quiet and offroad traction—we suspect the Jeep would've breezed up that hill as it breezed everywhere else.

There was certainly enough power. The test Jeep was equipped with the optional 258cid six (232cid six is standard), which has been around long enough that it can be considered as dependable as an oar. We had reservations at first that it wouldn't provide sufficient urge for the hills, particularly at the 5000-8000-foot altitudes common in our part of the country. To be sure, highway acceleration was modest, but it eventually got up to 60mph, which is as fast as you'd want to drive it anyway. Off the road the six was ideal, with plenty of low-end torque so it would rumble down to 600rpm without falling on its face. In really rough country you don't want to go fast anyway—in really rough country you can't go fast—and we recommend the six without reservation.

Don't buy it expecting good mileage, though. Even on the highway at a steady 55mph, you'll never do better than about 13mpg. You've got a big box to move down the road plus a lot of full-time four wheel drive machinery to whirl around plus the automatic transmission plus the big tires plus—no matter how much we recommend it—the six's limited power, which makes you use full throttle a lot. The result is 12mpg as a steady diet, with dips even lower if you go off the road a lot or run into a headwind, as we did on one leg of the return trip to Los Angeles. Mileage instantly dropped to 10 and below, and didn't get better until the wind dropped. So if you crave the optional 304 V8's greater power and slightly more relaxed cruising, don't shy away from it for reasons of economy. It could hardly be worse, and will probably be better under some conditions.

Speaking of the automatic transmission, it is a whiz for offroad use. No more slipping the clutch, no more flung dirt, no more rolling back to the bottom of the hill with a dead engine. The trans absorbs sudden shocks before they reach the wheels and keeps the tires clawing on the shifts. It's also hard to fault on engine braking. In low range, first gear, we found we could popple down any hill with the engine ticking over at 1000rpm, just walking speed, without touching the brakes. The only drawbacks we found to the automatic were, first, that coupled with an extraordinarily stiff throttle return spring it was difficult to idle across fields of boulders at a steady



This kind of slogging, sure death for a lesser vehicle, is like a day off for the CJ-7.

can't see where the '76 came from. Look at a '49 Jeep next to a '76 and it looks like the older one was made last Tuesday.

So thorough has been Jeep's domination of the field that it's only been the last few years that every offroad vehicle wasn't routinely called "Jeep." Even today it's fairly common to hear a novice speak of a "Toyota jeep" or "One of those Ford jeeps." Neither Jeep nor Toyota nor Ford like that very much, and all concerned are happy to see the practice coming to an end.

Jeep, we'll wager, is going to be a lot happier than Toyota or Ford with the newest of the Jeep line, though. The CJ-7 is a killer offroad vehicle.

To the casual eye, the CJ-7 looks almost

square, it's a CJ-7, if it's not, you're looking at a Five.

From within there is no problem telling the difference. The CJ-7 grew for two reasons: to make more room for the people inside, and to make room for the automatic transmission underneath. We can't quarrel with either reason; we're all over six feet tall, and most offroad enthusiasts will tell you an automatic is the way to go.

The CJ-7 gets Quadra-Trac, AMC's full-time four wheel drive. Perhaps we're out of step, but we think this is a mixed blessing. Even in western Nevada, where it's snowed all but three months this year, you don't really need four wheel drive all the time. It's just another costly and



speed (a snap with a stick; put it in granny and leave it alone), and, second, what do you do in the woods if the starter packs up? Granted, it hardly ever happens. But if it does, and you have a manual trans, you either winch yourself to the top of a hill or have somebody push you to three mph and bumpstart it. With an automatic, you may be there until the spring thaw. Your choice; on balance we'd pick the auto.

Now, the handling. If "handling" conjures up visions of honking around corners in a Lotus, stop and realign your thinking: handling is relative, and relative to what it's supposed to do the CJ-7 is a handler. It's mighty high off the ground, and it feels very tippy at first. It feels tippy at last, too, for all we know, since the height discouraged us from making an all-out run to see if it would slide before it would tip over. We think it would slide. There's no recognizable body lean, what with the massive springs, and the seats don't give anything like the lateral support of your average park bench, so it feels like you're going a lot faster than you are all the time. The wheelbase, even though 10 inches longer than the CJ-5's, is still only 93.5 inches, and with the optional power steering the CJ can be turned in a fairly short distance. If it won't thrill you on the road, at least it won't hurt you either.

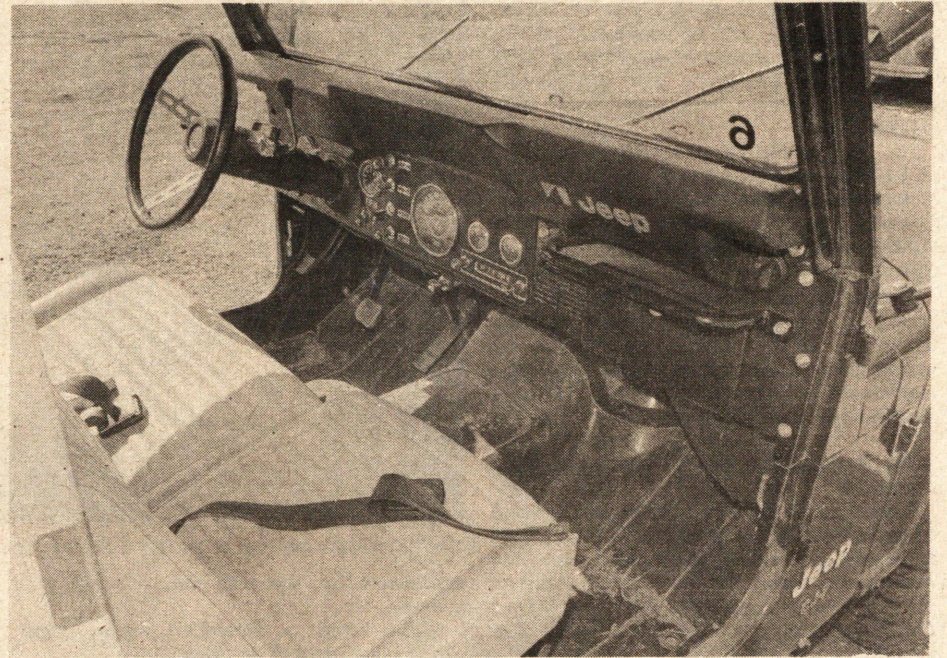
Off the road it's another story. As mentioned before, it would be hard to improve upon the Jeep's suspension, at least at reasonable cost, for offroad use. It's stout as an oak, for starters, with giant

normally has a chrome strip along the rocker panel that is missing from the Jeep on these pages. It is missing because it fell off. We had it put back on for the pictures, and it fell off again. We put it on again, and it fell off and under the rear wheels. We left it off.

New this year for the CJ is the swingaway spare tire carrier. This, too, was a source of trouble. American Motors laid on a fleet of a dozen or so CJ-7s for journalists to drive through the mountains at the vehicle's introduction. Next to the disappearing chrome strip—which was nearly universal—the next most common problem was with the tire carrier. John Dianna of *Car Craft* had the latch fail on his so it swung away every time he accelerated and slammed back into the rear of the Jeep when he braked. Somebody else's broke off the back of the Jeep and vanished into the woods, and ours separated at the welds holding the actual wheel mount to the swingaway part, leaving bracket, mag wheel, and tire sitting in the road. For what it's worth, when the local Jeepman welded it he did a much solidier job than the four spotwelds it had when it came from Kenosha.

But those are all annoyances. You might be irritated if they happened to your new Jeep, but you wouldn't be stuck. Our serious offroading friends report that such failures are normal for any vehicle the first few times it goes off the road, and that after a couple of trips the owner will have the bugs worked out and can expect relatively trouble-free performance. Sounds logical; the quality control for a

that's too low and too far away to do much good (but it does keep him from hitting his head on the windshield) and a pair of big knobs to turn to fold the windshield down. The whole is set off by nicely finished hex-head bolts that protrude wherever two parts join. Ahead through the (perfectly flat) glass one can see the wipers, which don't come close to seating at the bottom, and a hood just barely long enough to cover the engine, hooray.



The interior is not designed for the enthusiast driver, but it gets the job done. Note bolts.

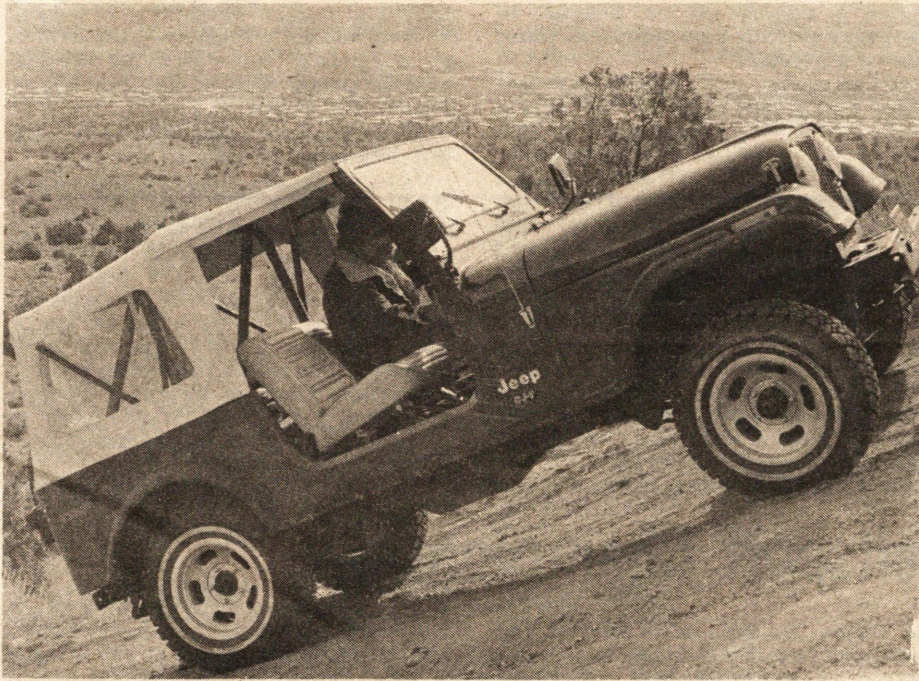
Constant readers will recall that one of our primary complaints with offroad vehicles has been the length of their hoods, which hide the road at the slightest upgrade. Not so with the CJ.

The visibility is likewise improved by the total lack of concessions to style. The Seven is just about as devoid of external frills as it can be, so what looks like the corner from the drivers seat is the corner, and you aren't forever knocking pieces off against a tree. It's also the easiest vehicle in the world to park, particularly with the top down.

Top. Buy a Jeep, and you'll learn to hate that word. The CJ-7 has an "available" hard top, available having replaced "optional" in adtalk. We haven't tried it, don't know anything about it except that it looks well constructed. But there is no way, no way in the world it could be harder to remove or install than the soft top.

Owners of old MGs, the kind where you stow the top pieces in the trunk, will shudder when they see the Jeep top. It's an enormous thing, first, the size of an MG Mitten for an apartment building, with more snaps and zippers than you'll find in the whole Oakland chapter of Hell's Angels. If one were to disassemble the framework completely (which we did, knowing no better), there would be, if memory serves, 16 separate pieces counting the little pins that hold it all together. Even if one simply removed the fabric and folded the framework back against the tailgate there would be a half-dozen bits to replace. We can state from first-hand experience that one man of average mechanical ability, working in a freezing rain while heckled by neighbors,

can expect to erect the completely disassembled top in about 45 minutes. Given familiarity and practice, and subtracting the rain, we still can't see it going up singlehanded in less than 20 minutes, 15 if you fly. Even if the framework is just folded back rather than stowed in the bed, it'll take a minimum of a quarter of an hour to get it up, and you will never, never be able to get all the snaps fastened if the weather is cold.



The Hill The Jeep Couldn't Make (see text): this is the only thing that stopped it.

members that give a pervading sense of strength and security. It's not very sophisticated, with live axles everywhere you look and leaf springs all over, but it does the job and the major parts never, never seem to break. As can be deduced from the accompanying photos, our Jeep was well-used, both while we had it and by others before our turn came around. Through it all, the Seven endured without a major failure.

The same cannot be said for the small parts and trim, unfortunately. The Jeep

Jeep is probably no different from that of a Gremlin and the treatment the Jeep got would leave a Gremlin a smoking ruin. All the more endorsement for the durability of the important parts.

Now, the cockpit. Or conning tower, would be more accurate. It is, as mentioned, way up in the air. You can see for miles. The instruments are displayed on a flat vertical dash down by your knees, near the worst radio ever and above a heater that will blow your leg off. There's a pipe grab rail for the passenger

Assuming that you do get the top up, it will provide a fair measure of protection from everything but cold and noise. The thin vinyl material offers next to no insulation. Rain is kept out, and snow, and blowing dust. Both door handles on our Jeep's top fell apart, so we had to lash the doors closed with string, but that, too, we understand, is part of the debugging process. Noise is a real problem at speeds over 50mph—the Jeep's profile is about as unaerodynamic a shape as can be imagined, so there's a fair amount of buffeting and slap from the canvas. And you'll need a sweater despite the excellent heater if the thermometer falls below 50 degrees.

But never mind all that. If you want to go in quiet and comfort on the highway, don't buy a CJ. Or at least try one with the hardtop and metal doors. If you want to have a good time, and thrash around like a crazy man without worrying that your mount will unbolt itself and leave you walking, consider a CJ.

We love it. Nevertheless, we're on the horns of a moral dilemma: the entire *Autoweek* staff happens to have moved to Reno to be out of the city, and we appreciate the environment too much to feel quite right about leaving tire tracks all over the countryside. If what you want to do is tear up grass and batter down trees, we don't want to know about it and neither does American Motors: every four wheel drive vehicle AMC sells comes with a little book preaching conservation and careful use of our natural resources.

But if you want a no-frills, go-anywhere vehicle at a relatively modest price (and if it doesn't sound modest, price some of the others), you can hardly beat the CJ-7. ♦

## 1976 American Motors Jeep CJ-7

### ENGINE

Type: Six cylinder inline, overhead valve  
Displacement: 258 cubic inches  
Bore/Stroke: 3.75 x 3.90 inches  
Compression ratio: 8.0:1  
Induction: One 1-barrel carburetor

### DRIVE TRAIN

Type: Front engine, full-time four wheel drive  
Transmission: Three speed automatic  
Final Drive ratio: 3.54:1

### SUSPENSION

Front: Live axle, leaf springs  
Rear: Live axle, leaf springs

### WHEELS & TIRES

Wheels: 8 x 15 alloy (optional)  
Tires: H78-15 bias-belted



### DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase: 93.5 inches  
Length: 147.9 inches  
Width: 59.9 inches  
Height: 71.3 inches with soft top, 70.5 inches with hard top  
Track (front/rear): 51.5/50.0 inches  
Weight: 2720 lbs. (Manufacturer's estimate with open body); Gross Vehicle Weight, 3750 lbs standard, 4150 lbs with optional extra heavy suspension

### MISCELLANEOUS

Turning circle: 35.9 feet  
Ground clearance: 6.9 inches  
Cargo floor height: 25.1 inches  
Fuel required: Unleaded gas  
Fuel Economy: 10-13mpg in normal driving

### PRICE

List: \$4295 base price, all options, delivery, and taxes extra